Defrosting Our Religion
Matthew 9:10-17
June 6, 1969

The more I think about the situation that passage of scripture describes the more humorous it becomes. And the funnier it gets the more I see in it an immediate relevance for the Church today.

Jesus was sitting at table with tax collectors and sinners; he could go no worse than that. No body was more despised than the tax collectors. They were the quislings, the traitors, the ones who had sold out to the occupying forces. The sinners were simply the common folk - the ones who had no time for our inclination toward the niceties of formal religion. The Aramaic word for sinner (khumaa) is "the harried" and it is best translated "outsider". The word is anti-elitist. These were the street people - the common, ordinary - you-and-me people who lived from day to day, real as mud, with little, if any, concern about such constructed "christian ecology". Jesus was at table with these.

Now these tables sometimes weren't any too spacious. Perhaps in the big mansions it belonged in one of them. The image that comes to my mind is a common gathering spot where talk was cheap and conversation could laugh and smoke mingle and the world put down. I get the feeling here of a [illegible] corner tavern - in a large city's slum neighborhood - the kind of which we read recently, where a riot there began. It must have been something like that. There was didn't indulge in the afternoon luncheons - it was nothing so civilized as formal meal.

In my mind, there was Jesus, sitting with these men and we can imagine loud laughing and rough talking - and - people on the periphery - outside in the street, or standing in the corners. The image is not complete until we include the Pharisees. They were hovering around somewhere, clean, well appointed sober, paragons of piety and propriety.

They had come to see this strange prophet from Nazareth: they were secondalized by what they saw.

Suddenly one of them mustered his courage and shouted out above the happy din: "Jesus of Nazareth, - what's the meaning of this? How can you explain this - you who would come in the name of the Lord, eating with people like these?" I imagine them being horrified. They represented religion: they stood for everything that was upright and good and respectable. And this man - well, anyone could see that he couldn't be worth listening to.

There were others among the peripheral spectators. Disciples of John the Baptist: lean, ascetic men who emulated their teacher by spending most of their time in the desert wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, regorously denying themselves for the sake of purity. The first stone was cast by the Pharisees. They threw the second: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples fo not fast?" It was a little like getting caught by the minister, sitting on your patio, cool drink in hand, on Sunday morning.

For the Jesus fasting was an obligation on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, and other publically proclaimed fast days. The reference here is to voluntary fasting, a personal discipline for those who wanted to do something additional as an expression of piety and devotion. It must have been a tense moment. Not many people agreed with John the Baptist, but there was no questioning their sincerity and devotion. And so Jesus replied gently but firmly: "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?"

He did not, you will notice, argue with them about their fasting. He made no value judgement. He merely introduced a new idea - that celebration just might be an appropriate mode of expression as far as he was concerned. The image of the wedding feast is, of course, quite

common in the vocabulary of the New Testament. Weddings were real celebrations. The wedding feast Jesus himself attended had been going on for several days before he got there; and from the amount of wine he provided it must have continued for several more days.

That, in any case, is the situation described in our New Testament lesson this morning. The situation itself can be interpreted as humorous--if we consider the reaction of the Pharisees. But it is also a very serious and important illustration of the kinds of conflicts the Gospel of Jesus Christ encounters in the world.

There are several things going on in this situation. There is the [illegible] conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment. From the very beginning he was most critical of the very way that respectable people practiced religion. Very serious, outwardly, but it never had any substance to it, any real spiritual depth, no moral integrity, and especially no faith in the nature of things. The very essence was the same. He returned to this [illegible]: increasingly he criticized them and even poked fun at their piety.

There is also the conflict between the Gospel and the [illegible] legalism of the Jews. It made this position quite clear. You can't [illegible] on the cloth. Neither can you pour new wine into old wineskins. Judaism -- as a religion -- could not serve as the spiritual structure for the appropriate expression of the Gospel.

But beneath these deep conflicts -- which ultimately would result in his death at the hands of these same religious authorities, I think we can perceive also a fundamental difference in life style and the role of things religious within life. And it is at the point that I feel this passage has great significance for us today.

We have come here this morning, ostensibly, because we are very happy about something. We are here on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We are here to give corporate expression to our faith that all is well,; that our destiny is in our redeemer. We come here, ostensibly, because we need to give symbolic, ritualized expression to our gratitude for the goodness of God. We gather together, ostensibly, because God's gracious act in Jesus Christ has added a new dimension to our relationships with each other. All in all we have a very happy weekly occasion - a true celebration.

[illegible] we begin this happy act of worship with a hymn of lament:

"Out of the [illegible] depths, our pleasures and how fair
The [illegible] of my days, their earthly beauty is,
[illegible] sin. [illegible] alone, my heart realizes,
[illegible] deserve to suffer [illegible]."

[illegible] why [illegible] in the world this morning, how precisely [illegible] with the expectations - of the celebration we have planned for as part of the day. [illegible] I suspect, as we [illegible] songs of Easter Dawn [illegible] somewhat unfortunately. The Sunday's [illegible] and why [illegible] for [illegible] joy, joy [illegible] deep [illegible] heart.....[illegible] I may [illegible] never [illegible] a hymn of Praise in a Presbyterian Church [illegible] that [illegible] that [illegible] resembles the feeling that accompanied that. And I can't help but wonder why? Is it that the hymns are too hard? - I don't think that - anybody who can hum the chromatic and tone variations of "Happy Birthday" can surely do a creditable job on "Holy, Holy, Holy". Is it that we are embarrassed and self conscious about our lack of musical ability? That may be the case, and if it is, allow me to remind you that hymns are not for aesthetic satisfaction but for expressing feelings we can't otherwise express. And if they don't get that job done, we ought to find some other activity like clapping our hands.

I I've singled out hymn singing because nothing depresses me so much as mumbling through a glorious hymn of praise as if it were a funeraldi dirge. Yet the problem is not simple enough to be solved by"more volumn on the chorus". I think it cuts deeply to the heart of our own life style, and has to do with the same kinds of conflicts regarding the role of religion that confronted Jesus as he sat at that raucous table with the sinners.

[illegible] perhaps, reflects a life style that is mostly serious business. I have the feeling that the generation gap is widest at this point. [illegible] adult world, in which you and I do our living, comes across as a dull, [illegible] realm of unchallenging activities devoid of fun. The worship music and ritual speak to us the working communities of the world's work that is determined solely by the needs of that life and the [illegible]. Life is basically a serious enjoyment in responding [illegible] to an unfathomable God. We are reconciled [illegible] with God. [illegible] overcome that loneliness here, and we work for the [illegible] of the world, we [illegible] ability, to [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]. That is, we [illegible] a pleasure-filled experience in the [illegible] way all [illegible] [illegible]. It simply never occurs to us that this [illegible] - this [illegible] - [illegible] it is - is to [illegible] in and of itself. I think [illegible] this is - is a good gift of God - to be used and enjoyed as a normal thing.

[illegible] reflects a life style that doesn't quite know what to do with pleasure. But it also [illegible] a religiosity - expressed by the Pharisees. What is religion? For most people it is a restrictive, negative, narrow phenomenon that is best expressed in black suits and solemn piety. The Detroit Industrial Mission published a paper in 1968 which observed that of most of the industrial workers in that city - "the Church means not swearing, smoking, drinking. It means hushing up sex

it often means forsaking union membership. It means avoiding associating with the unsaved " [God's Chosen People p127] That is, religion means the same thing it meant to the Pharisees - as they looked down their pious noses at a happy, earthy gathering of common men enjoying each other's genuine humanity.

I think this congregation needs nothing so much as to "defrock it religion". I think this, not because life is a bed of roses - which it is not; not because the best way to cope with the tragic and depressing aspects of life encumbered with wars and riots and starvation is to ignore it - for evil is irresponsible. I think this way because the Gospel of Jesus Christ, believed and lived, makes pious ostentation in life and worship look silly as well.

[illegible] Gospel is good news - or it is nothing. Real Gospel brings a [illegible] joy - or it is a fraud - just religion. Christianity is a warm, happy, life-loving, life-affirming, life-enhancing way of life responding to the love of God. Just as it doesn't make a person [illegible] to laugh and enjoy, I either haven't heard it, or I don't believe it.

[illegible] salvation is available as we receive it by grace through faith, and we do believe, but what makes the case stronger is [illegible] our believing from our living and worshiping. It is, therefore, to the disadvantage - an appeal, very simply - to "deflect our religion". [illegible] could do this more than that.

[illegible] of Grace, give us the Ability to see each moment of life as a sacred gift. Give us the perspective to see our lives as sacred trust to be lived and enjoyed. Give us the grace to laugh at ourselves - at each other and at the goodness of your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen